

Interview with

GEORGE SIMPSON, JR.

Bettie, North Carolina

Interviewed by Lily Johnson and Tara Hinton on July 31, 2024

Transcribed by Lily Johnson

Down East Change Project

GEORGE SIMPSON: Oh, you got two?

TARA HINTON: Yeah, they're not going anywhere.

GS: I hope they match! Have you seen the Microsoft application when you do like a Zoom call, where it transcribes the conversation?

LILY JOHNSON: Mhmm.

GS: That is the coolest thing ever.

LJ: Yeah, it's awesome.

GS: I try to take notes. We don't have it where I work, but that is awesome. You can just go by reading. You can try to take notes.

LJ: I wish, yeah, all of my classes that are held on Zoom, I don't even watch the video. I just read what she says. So it's been nice.

TH: It's really good.

GS: Anyway, go ahead.

TH: Oh, yeah, all right, we could go ahead and start out.

LJ: Yep!

TH: Lily, do you want to take it? Yeah?

LJ: Yeah, so, here, I'll start for the recording. So this is Lily Johnson and Tara Hinton with the Core Sound Museum. We are interviewing George Simpson over on his family farm, and we're going to get started. So what is your name? Where were you born? General life history. Where did your parents grow up? Where did you grow up?

GS: George Simpson, Jr. I was born at Sea Level Hospital. Grew up right here. This farm was the limit of my world as a child, that's where I spent every day. Went to college at NC State University. Have worked in agriculture ever since, and have lived here in Bettie, about a half mile from the farm, for 26 years. My mom and dad—my mom is from Otway, my dad is from Bettie, and have lived right at the face of the farm their entire adult life, so that's us.

TH: Okay, and will you just tell us your parents' names, for the record?

GS: George Senior and Sandra Thompson. Can you hear this? You think this is loud enough?

TH: I think you're perfect.

GS: Okay.

TH: This thing picks up on a snap like six feet away.

GS: Okay, good—good. I just wanted to make sure you didn't get back and go like "What?"

LJ: [Laughs] So do you think of yourself as belonging to Down East? Why? Or why? Not?

GS: Sure, absolutely. It's funny, because when I travel, you'll see from this interview, I don't have a Down East brogue, at all. It's kind of like, I have a monotone language, or whatever you want to call it, vernacular. But my dad does, right? So I always get asked that question, "Are you sure you're from down there?" And I am. I mean, I grew up here. I knew what it's like for, to have family and friends that grew up in the fishing industry, grew up doing those things. But our family has been here in Carteret County since the 1800s and have always been involved in agriculture. So like my great-grandfather moved here, bought this farm in 1918. He was 36 years old, he was born in 1881. He bought that original 10 acres first, and then he bought where we're sitting, and then he bought the last half. And when he died in 1941, he still owed money on the last half. So, yeah, we're as much a part of Down East as probably anybody. And you know, I think you're probably getting to this—what I'm gonna say now. When I was a kid—I'm 58, so when I was probably 8—you know, really when you start thinking about when you started remembering things—8 or 10 years old, right? There was 9 or 10 operating farms on Bettie—on Bettie! From Ward's Creek Bridge to North River Bridge, there were 9 or 10—and I thought about it multiple times today—operating on Bettie. And today there are two operating farms. Our farm—don't worry, it won't bite you you—our farm and then—which is actually leased now—and my cousin's farm, the Pakes, at the other end of Bettie, which still tend to their land. So agriculture's always—farming has always been a big part of Carteret County, probably a part that gets overlooked a little bit, you know, but, yeah, part of it, sure.

LJ: So, how would you describe your community? And what keeps you living here?

GS: This place right here. I work for an international fertilizer company, and I'm a regional manager that has 12 or 13 states now, from South Carolina to Vermont, so I could live anywhere. And 26 years ago, decided I wanted to live here, because here's home, and I knew that I wanted my children to be able to come here and see the farm and do farm things. And they did growing up. Because when they were growing up, Mom and Dad were still farming. They had the greenhouse business. They had the strawberry business up there. Mama had the bakery things. So they were involved with helping them and those things, but you know, it's, I don't know. I just—home is where, you know, homes where you're from, so that's why I'm here. I could be anywhere—living in Raleigh, would probably be smarter, right? But I'm here and know where I'm at, so.

TH: Can you tell us a little bit more about growing up Down East, on a farm, and what that looked like? Could you give us sort of like a day-to-day of what your average would be?

GS: You know the difference between, I would say, when I was a kid growing up on a farm, and like somebody my age that grew up in fishing or something like that, and Mike Fulcher, whose family owned Clayton Fulcher Seafood was a really good friend of my dad's, and I used to go down there in summers and stay with Mike for a week at a time. [It was] similar in that it was daylight to dark, to dusk. You know, you got up every day and you worked from the time the sun came up until the time the sun went down. You got it the next day and did it again. It was Monday through Saturday, and Sunday you went to church, and then Sunday afternoon you slept, and you started all over on Monday. So it was a very strong work ethic, and it was something that, to me, was normal. I mean, I didn't, I didn't know it was any, I didn't know it was any different. To me, that's what it was. I think that probably the thing about growing up on a farm here, right? In Carteret County, versus growing up on a farm in Ayden, where you're surrounded by farms, right? We were, I was one of the few kids my age in high school that came from a farming background, and that's gotten less and less over time. But I, you know, had friends and fished and did other things, so, you know, it wasn't a big difference to me. I think the biggest thing was—that I'd take away from this—is what you'd learned about being timely, about being precise, about effort and about work and those kind of things that you only can learn from a place like a farm or a fishing boat or something like that, where you directly see the impact of what you do has on the outcome. It's hard for folks to see that sometimes, because they really don't, you know, they can't see it. They can't see that.

LJ: Would you say you've passed that on to your children?

GS: Tried to.

LJ: Yeah, so you said they're in the College of Ag[riculture]—are they going to kind of carry on the legacy?

GS: So they both have graduated. So the oldest—the youngest just graduated in this semester. She graduated with a degree in nutrition, and her objective is to go to PT school, which is very rigorous. So I would say that she learned that, you know, being rigorous and mindful of those, partially from the farm. Their background in agriculture is different than mine, because it's a very different farm when they grew up than when I grew up. My oldest graduated two years ago. She just finished up. She will actually graduate with her master's degree this December. She graduated with a BS in Biochemistry and Plant Biology and a Master's degree in Plant Physiology. So she chose that path purposely because she wanted to be involved in agriculture. So, you know, I always tell people the practical application of science is agriculture, and that's a piece that a lot of people don't get about farming. How much science is involved in agriculture and farming and in that corn crop right over there. And she will probably be involved in the science side more than she will be the application side. But you got to have that, right? You got to have the science, and you got to have kids and people—I say kids because these are the younger people

coming into it. You got to have people going into that, that understand what it means to have someone that, every day, gets up and tries to make their living out of the soil. You know, and the effort that goes into that. So yeah, that's where they are.

TH: And you said that this farm here is different for your kids growing up than it was for you.

GS: Yeah, very much so.

TH: Can you tell us about that?

GS: Well see, when I grew up as a kid, my dad was in the vegetable business, in that he grew cabbage and potatoes. He had hogs—where we're sitting right now, was actually a hog barn and pasture. He had cattle, and he had row crops with corn and beans. In the late '80s, when the farm credit crunch happened, he scaled back his operation, and that's when he really expanded the greenhouse business. And Simpson's Tomatoes was well known, you've probably heard people talk about them, right? They were well known, and he did that from 1984-5 until he retired two years ago. So the rest of the farm, and really the part that he used of this 100-acre farm, was right up here at the highway, where the greenhouse is and where the bakery is. In those fields, there we grew strawberries, we grew cantaloupes and watermelons and things. So this part of the farm back here changed, and has been rented out for several years to people that grow row crops. So they didn't have the experience that I had of those much larger acres of crops that were, you know, planted from January and February, harvested in August and September. Theirs was mainly the greenhouse, the strawberry house, the bakery, and those things. But they know this land like the back of their hand back here too, so.

LJ: Can you give us an overview of the environment of your land? So, low points, high points? What's the soil like? And what do you grow?

GS: I don't grow anything. We rent it to someone who grows corn today. You know, I think that question, that you're going to get to the sustainable question eventually? Do you want to go ahead and get to that now?

TH: Sure, sure, we'd love to.

GS: So you know the legal definition of sustainable agriculture, right?

LJ: Um, a little bit.

GS: No, come on now.

TH: I'll say not off the top of my head.

GS: Now you're asking the question, so you should know the answer. Legal definition of sustainable—this is from the USDA's website. The term sustainable agriculture means an integrated system of plant and animal production practices having a site-specific application that will, over time: One, satisfy human food and fiber needs. Two, enhance environmental quality and natural resource base upon which the agriculture economy depends. Three, make the most efficient use of non-renewable resources and on-farm resources and integrate, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls. Four, sustain the economic viability of farm operations. Five, enhance the quality of life for farmers in society as a whole. Right? So let's start at the bottom. "Enhance the quality of life for farmers and society as a whole." What's the first thing you said when you got out of the car?

TH: It's beautiful here.

GS: Right, okay. So there's a there's a place for farms in society—just from an aesthetic standpoint, just what they do, just because they're beautiful places. And I think as a society, we have to make sure we understand the value of that and protect that. Second one from the bottom: "Sustain the economic viability of farm operations." The term sustainable agriculture, to me, is a combination of buzzwords that is misleading and really makes people feel good that really don't understand what it means, okay? My great-grandfather bought that 10 acres of land in 1918 when he was 36 years old. He raised four kids. My grandfather, whose house is right over there, took over the operation when he, well before he died or when he [great-grandfather] died in 1941. And he raised his kids. My dad, right over there, took over the operation and raised his family.

So, I'm the fourth generation to be involved in this farm, and at one point in time, I did tend—as we say in agriculture, tend this farm—and my kids grew up on this farm and understand what farming and agriculture is. So they're the fifth. So the one with the Plant Physiology degree is the fifth one to be involved in agriculture, directly because of this piece of land. So, "sustain the economic viability of the farm." If that's not what that means, somebody wake me up and tell me. So a sustainable farm that's been around for over 100 years in the same family. And you think about, he bought this in 1918. What happened in 1920? Great Depression, right? Two world wars, right? So, Great depression, two world wars, economic crutch of the '70s, grain embargoes, all those things, and it's still sitting here, owned by the same people after 100 some years. "Make the most efficient use of non-renewable resources and on-farm resources and integrated, where appropriate, natural biological cycles and controls." That corn crop right there was planted mid-April. The farmer that plants that corn, that grows, that tends our farm now, does a really good job. A young man that does a great job. Really good farmer, very conscientious. That crop takes, requires a certain amount of nutrients for it to grow: nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium. And what irritates me—and I'm in the fertilizer business, okay? But what irritates me is the notion that farmers are poisoning the planet because they're just out there throwing things out. Okay? One, it's too expensive to do that. And number two, I've never—and I've been in the agriculture business since 1993 and on the farm ever since I was three years old, you know, whenever I could walk. I've never heard or seen a farmer say, "You know Lily, today, I'm gonna get up and I'm gonna go back there, to that field that's been in our family for 100 years, the best piece of land on our farm, and I'm gonna destroy it." It'd be like a fisherman going to the dock and saying, "You know what, I'm gonna sink

my boat." It's something that they don't do. And it's a misguided notion that's really an insult to the farmers that farm today.

The amount of technology that's used by farmers today is astounding. I mean, it's apps—and I'm not talking about satellites and site-specific and RTK steering. I'm talking about the simple fact that the planter that he uses right there can singulate a corn seed and plant 33,000 plants per acre and place them four and a half inches, or five inches apart, or whatever it is. It's amazing. It's truly amazing. So, yeah, is it sustainable? "Enhance environmental quality and a natural resource based upon which agriculture economy depends." There's few places—you're from Ayden, you've seen it—there's few places that are more, that do more to enhance the environmental quality than a farm. I don't care if it's a hog farm, cattle farm, dairy farm, our farm—that's what they do. The reason you have such good environmental conditions around us is because of farming, right? That leads to the whole climate change thing and carbon, CO₂, right? Remember biology? Remember photosynthesis? What do plants do? Take in CO₂, and somehow they magically split it, they spit out oxygen. They sequester carbon and turn part of it into glucose, which the plant uses to feed itself and grow, and then the rest of it, it sequesters in the ground. How is CO₂ poison? No. CO₂ is a nutrient that that crop needs, just like it needs nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, water, everything else. Because like I said earlier, the practical application of science is farming. The practical application of chemistry—ask my daughter this question—practical application of organic chemistry is right over there in that cornfield, because that's 100% chemistry at work. And I hated chemistry. And the last one, "Satisfy human food and fiber needs." We have the cheapest, safest, most abundant foods of life anywhere on the planet, right here. And it's because of the technology and the efficiency of the people that get up every morning, and put on a pair of dirty boots and a hat, and get in a pickup truck, and go climb on a tractor. It's because of farmers. It's not because of what's in Food Lion. And when you walk into Food Lion today, on the 31st day of July, and you can buy strawberries today, the 31st day of July—which you shouldn't be able to do, right? It's because there's farmers in California that that's what they do. They grow strawberries. The reason you can buy baby carrots—you know what baby carrots are? What are they?

LJ: Little, tiny carrots.

GS: You know what they really are? They're big carrots that have been cut down.

LJ: Yep.

GS: There are no such things as baby carrots. It's a marketing thing. The reason you can buy them is because that's all that Grimmway does. That's all that Grimmway does. They grow carrots. That's it. So, that's what, you know, if you look at sustainable agriculture, and you look at the legal definition and you say, "Okay, well, that's nice." But when you put it into context, that's what this is. That's what this is. That was a long answer.

TH: Great. Thank you for that response.

GS: You're welcome, you're welcome.

TH: It was wonderful. I wanted—can I ask a follow up?

GS: Sure!

TH: Okay, well, you talked about this misguided notion of sustainable agriculture. Can you talk a little bit more about where you think that's coming from?

GS: Social media.

TH: Okay, yeah!

GS: And the public, not knowing. It's like organics—organic agriculture, okay? Organic, organic production—and I have a lot, I know a lot of people in the agriculture community that grow across organic—when you buy Grimmway carrots, whether in an organic bag or regular bag, they're organic. Because it's easier for Grimmway to grow all their carrots organically than it is for them to grow part of their carrots organically. So they have to grow under organic protocol, all right? And to grow under that organic protocol, they had to be certified by USDA, then all their production practices had to be under organic practices. That corn crop right there doesn't know if the nitrogen they're applying to it was organic or not. It just knows that it's nitrogen in a form the plant can take up, whether it's ammoniacal nitrate or whatever, all right? But the perception in the public is, organic is better for you. And there is no proof ever been done that any organic crop is better for you than a conventionally grown crop.

Now, a lot of people point to, to flour and those things, and gluten intolerance and talk about that. Next time you go to the grocery store, pick up a bag of flour, regular flour, all purpose, read what's in that, and pick up a bag of organic flour, and read what's in that. And the difference is not the wheat, but everything after the word wheat, because in regular flour, all these things have been added. In organic flour, there's nothing added. So, I say misguided notion, because it's just when you've got 1% of the population feeding the US—which is about what you got, 300 and some odd million people, 400 million people in the US—and you got 1% growing all the crops. It's real hard for them to get the message out, “We're not trying to poison you. We're not trying to kill you. We're not poisoning the planet. And what we're doing is environmentally sensitive and economically sound and provides you with the best food you can have.” Really hard for them to do that, because they're worried about labor, inputs, harvest, planting and all those things. So that I got that, I stole that misguided notion term from a work colleague years ago, but to me, it really sums up when people spout off things and they really don't do enough research to know, right? That's really—and that's not something you can really overcome very easily. But you got to keep—I mean, it's things like this. I didn't, I honestly, and I'll say it on recording. I really wasn't excited about doing this interview, right? I'm not that person. But I think it's important to have a voice, you know, and speak, speak to some things at times, let people know some things at times, that the way things are, so.

TH: Well, thanks for sitting down and talking with us.

GS: You're welcome! Yeah, no problem.

LJ: Yeah, we really appreciate it.

GS: I'm not saying—I just, you know, and I appreciate your question, so. Any, well that, was that it?

TH: Oh, yeah. I mean, the only other thing I was going to ask is that you, if you have any solutions with this public perception, do people just need to go and get their hands in the ground?

GS: People—the thing, you know, it's like the whole, it's like the whole "Buy Local" notion, right? Okay? What does that mean? "Buy Local"? Is it a farmer that's growing it? Or is it somebody growing in their backyard? My dad, using the business, was the first GAP certified farm in our county. GAP is an NCDA program for good agriculture practices—you have to meet a whole laundry list of things to be GAP certified, to say that you're GAP certified. Put no money in his pocket. It didn't increase his yield, it didn't increase his quality, it didn't increase his income, right? But it made somebody feel good, that he's "GAP certified." Did it make him do a better job? He was already doing that job, right? He was already doing it to that level, because if he wasn't, he couldn't have been GAP certified. He had a lady one time, when he was in the strawberry business. And when he was in the strawberry business, the field behind the bakery, that building up there, was the strawberry field. And the doors were open front to back, and my youngest daughter was probably three or four, and she was out there in the field just eating, you know, "working,"—eating strawberries. And this lady was quizzing him about his production—"Do you grow organically? Do you spray pesticides? And, do you do all these things?" And he looked at her and he said, "Ma'am, you see that little girl out there?" He said, "that's my granddaughter—do you think I'm gonna do anything to harm her? Because I can assure you, I care a whole lot more about her than I do you." And that's the approach, that's the approach that farmers take, you know? They—you'd be hard pressed to go to a farm and find one that's growing vegetables and won't eat what they grow, right? That's the first thing they do. "Hey, we got some new peas. Hey, we got some new this." They know, because they've had it, so.

TH: Do we want to go back to the question about the land?

GS: Yeah, yeah.

TH: Can you tell us just about, like, what is the geography of this farm look like? Like, where the high spots, the low spots?

GS: You're sitting on the high spot.

TH: Okay, yeah.

GS: This land, because it's in the coastal plain, is pretty flat. You know, you probably got, I'm gonna say, a foot variation in elevation. This piece, where we're sitting right now by the pond, is called Rabbit Hill. I don't know why it's called Rabbit Hill. I asked Dad not long ago, "Why is it called Rabbit Hill?" He said, "I have no idea." Okay, but it's called Rabbit Hill. If you look at it on a soil map, the farm kind of falls as it goes north, lower to the back, more organic to the back. It's sandier here—sandy loam type soil here. But pretty flat and level, and that's why, you know you have drainage ditches and those things. You know, a lot of places you go in agriculture, either they don't have ditches or they have ditches to, to move water in. We have ditches to move water off, because we get 52 inches of rain a year, and sometimes it's got to go somewhere, so.

TH: So is it—do you know when those ditches were done on this land? Out of curiosity?

GS: I do. So my great-granddaddy bought the farm in 1918, he bought that part up there, which was already a farm. Then he bought this piece, this part right here, and then he bought the back, and he cleared it, all right? Now, if you look back that way, now you see all these big pine trees and everything, like the pine trees right here. There's three grain bins right there that you can't really see because of the pine trees. Okay, that's not what it was like in 1920. It was, they referred to it as a Wiregrass Ridge. It was basically merkle bushes, wire grass, and scrub pines. He cleared that back portion, back there, by hand, with a mule. Laid it out, dug the ditches at night, with a shovel, and a lantern. That's how those ditches were originally dug.

LJ: Wow.

GS: He was the man.

TH: Wow.

GS: Yeah. And he died 1941. So he came here in in 1918, so he was 36 and he died '41, so he was, what, 58 or something? My age? I couldn't do it. And for a long time, for a long time when I was a kid, the ditches on our farm were cleaned out by hand. That's how they were, every year they were. Dad had a guy that that's what he did, was he came and he cleaned them out. So you see all those, there's that's the that's where we're sitting, and you see all those fields right there?

LJ: Mhmm.

GS: So, right about here, that was a line that went across here, and that's the end the farm. Dad bought this portion in the '70s. But all those fields were laid out and the ditches were dug by hand.

TH: Wow, that's incredible.

GS: Yeah, and it was probably until the late, early '80s, that they were still dug out, still cleaned every year, by hand, and then dad bought a machine to clean during other times. But that's how it was done.

So sandy clay loam soil—typical for coastal plain. You know, it's got moderate to good soil capacity. It's got CEC up to probably 10, 8, somewhere in there, not a really great high soil capacity. Depth of clay is, I don't know, six, eight inches, maybe. We're not like Tahoe, where they have 20 feet, don't know what that would be like.

TH: Do you know, like, the soil salinity? What's that like around here?

GS: I can look it up, I've got an app for that. There's an app for that, you know?

TH: Oh really?

GS: You didn't know that?

TH: I had no idea.

GS: Come on! Soil Web.

TH: Oh, my gosh!

LJ: Oh, wow.

TH: I love this!

GS: Download it! UC Davis Soil Web. It goes off your geo-location. Tells you the soil type, depth, all the horizon depths, all those things. And then if you click on details, it tells you what type of soil it, is all those things.

TH: Wow. Oh, I love this. Who created this app?

GS: It's based off the, what's it called, USGS soil maps. But it's called Soil Web, and it's from, I want to say, USDA, NRCS, UC Davis. This app was developed by California Soil Resource Lab and UC Davis in collaboration with USDA, NRCS—it's free.

TH: I will be downloading that!

GS: Soil Web, It's cool.

TH: (Laughs).

GS: Yeah, it's really cool. Anywhere you go, you can, you know, because it geo locates, you can just boop—and it... So, like boop, boop [drops a pin on our location on his phone]. That's how it works.

TH: That's awesome, wow.

GS: You know that technology, I told you about in farming? Love technology, it may take a while to load, but here you go, here we go. So we could move to over there. You know, we'd have to walk down the cornfield, but we could move and it would geo-locate us.

TH: Amazing.

GS: Yeah.

LJ: Wow.

GS: Pretty cool stuff.

TH: It is. And do a lot of other farmers that you know use it? Is that pretty common?

GS: Probably not.

TH: No? Okay.

GS: I have it because of my job.

TH: Yeah, okay.

GS: You know most farmers, you know, they know.

TH: They know.

GS: They know their farm.

TH: For sure.

GS: They know the land. They know, if they work... whoever they work with, if it's a consultant, or if it's an ag retailer or something, they're taking the soil test and sending it in, then the soil test comes back from NCDA and tells them this is how much humic matter you have and all those things. So that's really what they look at—what's contained in that acreage of soil that they have.

LJ: So, your job is what?

GS: My paying job?

LJ: Mhm, yeah. [Laughs].

GS: I am the regional sales manager for an international fertilizer company. So, we sell fertilizer to ag retail companies, and the geography that I cover is from South Carolina to Vermont.

LJ: Okay. So was there, like what was the decision to change from growing here to leasing? Could you tell me a bit more about that?

GS: Oh, well—for me or for dad?

LJ: Yeah, well whenever the farm changed over.

GS: Well, for a while, you know, when dad transitioned to just the greenhouse and the strawberry business up there, he still tended the farm back here, but he grew row crops. He didn't grow cabbage and potatoes and those things anymore. One of the biggest factors there was labor. That is the, that is the thing that's crippling agriculture today is labor. And what a lot of people don't understand is what H-2A labor is. People that are from Mexico, they come here on a work visa, as an H-2A visa, and they work for the season, and then they go back. I don't, what's the, what's the national wage? \$7...

LJ: 25?

GS: \$7.25. I think the adverse affected wage rate is like \$14.80? So when you go buy a field and you see those guys out there that are from Mexico, they're not getting 7 dollars an hour. They're getting \$14.85. And the farmer has to put them, have a place for them to stay. So there's a lot of cost involved with that. That's probably the, that is the single largest thing crippling agriculture today—the single biggest impediment they have. It was one of the reasons Dad transitioned away from this into the greenhouse, because he could do majority by himself and with a couple others, to be more practical. When I moved here—so that was in '92—I took over taking care of the farm, tending the farm for a few years. And then when my kids got older, then it became, because—and I was doing it because I wanted to, right?—I had a full-time job. When my kids got older, it became a decision. Because I could only be farming on Saturday and Sunday. It became a decision—am I going to their basketball game? Or am I spraying beans? Am I going to the horse show? Or am I planting beans? Am I doing this? So it became a decision for me of being a father versus being a farmer. And I chose to be a father. And at the same time, a different farmer was looking for more ground, so we leased it to him, and then subsequently he's quit farming, and so now we lease it to someone else. So that's how we got to that portion. Not a very uncommon story.

LJ: Yeah, that was my next one. Is that pretty common?

GS: Very common. Yeah, we see what, in my line of, in the fertilizer business, particularly—because we deal with tobacco farmers, vegetable farmers, watermelon, cantaloupe, those kind of farmers all the time. As that generation gets older, there are fewer behind them taking that over, and as that operation phases out, the high value specialty crop goes to commodity crop like corn, beans, cotton. Because one

person can't do—tend a farm. Because it doesn't take the labor, because it's primarily...still capital intensive—like crazy.

LJ: Yeah.

GS: But labor, you know, one guy can tend 200 acres of peanuts where one person couldn't tend 200 acres of tobacco at all. They couldn't even, they couldn't do anything with 200 acres of tobacco by themselves.

TH: And the people who are leasing this farm right now? They're doing it by themselves?

GS: Yeah. Well, no, he tends, he leases our farm. I don't know how many acres he has total, but he leases. You know, there's multiple farms that he leases, in addition to this one.

TH: Wow.

GS: So yeah, it's not just our farm that he's tending to. He's tending to multiple.

LJ: Is he local?

GS: Mhmm.

LJ: Do you typically lease to locals?

GS: Mhm. I have, we have.

LJ: You kinda have to?

GS: Hope we never have to go down that path. The difficulty in that is, how do you move the equipment? You know, his combine head is 24 rows wide—that's hard to move down the highway.

LJ: Mhm.

GS: Ask away. Don't feel like you're taking my time.

TH: Okay, okay.

GS: I've got all the time in the world.

TH: Okay, I was gonna say, maybe, do you think we could talk about Florence a little bit?

GS: Sure.

TH: Or any other hurricane that may have impacted this land here?

GS: You know, unless it's salt water intrusion, agricultural land is very resilient, right? There was water in Florence, on this farm, in places I've never seen water before, right? But the guy that was tending the farm then, was picking corn on Friday before the hurricane hit, parked two combines here, and came back the next week and finished picking. So—and the next year, had a great crop too—so the long term effect on this farm, because it was not saltwater intrusion, was minimal. There was, you know, damage to trees, buildings, same things that hit everybody else. You know, you've got trees down that you gotta clean up, but that was probably the impact from Florence, more than anything.

TH: Yeah, if it was saltwater intrusion, what would you have done? Because I'm sort of unfamiliar with it.

GS: Saltwater intrusion on agricultural land is, you have to move the sodium molecule through the soil profile. And the only way you move the sodium molecule—because it comes to the top right? Because it's bound to the spore that goes to the top. So you have to move it through the water, the soil profile, and you typically have to bond it to something else, like calcium. So you have to put gypsum out and till it in, and it takes multiple years. But typically, with rainfall and adequate moisture, it'll move down in the soil profile. And if you go to places like Hyde County, where they have a high water table, and a high proficiency rate, and they're near a lot of saltwater, they will actually get some coming up in the soil and going down. So they manage it a lot differently, but, but the biggest thing is, is getting that sodium molecule bound to something else.

LJ: Would you say that this land is at risk of salt water intrusion or no?

GS: Not really, no.

LJ: No?

GS: If this right here, where we're sitting today, has saltwater on it—that's an Apollo 13 problem. "Houston, we've got a problem." Because all that [points to farm in front of us]—is gone. So, it was bad, though. I mean, it was. What happens here, because this farm drains that way, okay? So there's a ditch right there beside that pond that runs there, across here, and down the edge, and it actually goes out into Ward's Creek. What happens is, when the tide comes in, it backs everything up. All right? So it's not the tide backing in as much as it's the other way around. We've got other storms that come through, tropical storms and those kind of things, and that pond will be level-full and out of the bank and into the ditch simply because it's trying to leave and it can't, right? But as soon as the wind shifts, the tide drops, it goes. So this farm's probably not at risk for salt water intrusion. If it was, you have a whole lot of other things.

LJ: Bigger issue.

GS: Yeah, bigger issues.

TH: That's good to hear, though.

GS: Well, you know it's funny, because if you think back to 1918 when Granddaddy bought this—Great Granddaddy bought this place, they didn't have a Soil Web app, all that kind of stuff, they knew what to look at. They knew just by looking at the land and the plants that were growing on the land—they knew what was suitable and not suitable for farming. And that's how they—you know, why are some places cleared and some places not? And it goes back 100 years, and those old folks, they knew, they knew what they were looking at, so.

TH: Yeah. And as far as over the past, like, say, 50 years, have you seen any changes in weather patterns on this land here?

GS: You know, that's a funny question. It's always been hot in the summer and kind of cold in the winter. And you know, doesn't rain in May, sometimes in June. Hurricanes in September and October. It's hard for me to say that over my lifetime, I've seen a big change in weather patterns or climate. I think technology allows us to be more aware of things today, you know? When Hurricane Hazel hit, I don't think everybody knew it was coming, till it was here. My God, we knew Florence was coming for how many days? It's coming—it's gonna hit us right here. It's hitting right here, it's coming across. You know, it's technology sometimes gives you the ability to see things that you can't understand. Kind of gets back to my comment earlier about CO₂, though, right?

TH: Sure.

GS: You know how they increase production in greenhouses? In Canada, there's a lot of greenhouses in Canada that grow tomatoes, okay? Commercial tomatoes. You know how they increase the production of the tomatoes in a greenhouse? They increase the CO₂ level. Cause when you increase the CO₂ level of a plant, it increases the production of a plant. That's my climate answer.

TH: Absolutely, that's completely fine. Yeah, yeah.

GS: Is that what you wanted? Is that what you were getting at?

TH: Oh yeah, that's great!

LJ: Yeah, that's great.

GS: Okay.

TH: That's great. I was just, we were listening to someone the other day talk about nighttime temperatures really rising, and that impacting crops. And I was wondering, if you had seen that at all? Or if that just is not a problem here?

GS: I don't know that I've seen that. Can't say that I've put a finger on that and seen that.

TH: Yeah, absolutely.

GS: It does affect crops, that crops—through transpiration—that crop's doing what it does during the day. And at night, when it gets cool, is when it kind of rests, takes a breath, regenerates itself, and those things. So a cooler night temperature is advantageous for sure.

TH: Yeah, so you would say...

GS: But, I don't know. You know, when I was 8 years old, 10 years old, I just knew it was hot. I didn't know what the temperature was, just hot. We didn't drink water by then, either we drank Pepsi, all day. Like they didn't make it anymore.

TH: Yeah, so you would say, probably that, just to summarize, that you don't feel like you're seeing, a climate impact here?

GS: I would say, without, without making a guesstimate or an assumption. I couldn't say...

TH: Sure. Okay...

GS: From my perspective, that I can see or really know if there's been an appreciable change in that. Weather's always changing, y'all, you know? We went to Utah two weeks ago on vacation. You know, the Grand Canyon was once underwater? The Grand Canyon was once underwater—think about that. We were at a place, Castle Rock State—National Park, and they've got some pretty big canyons there too. They were under 300 feet of water. That's in Utah! I was at Open Ground Farms a couple years ago with Antonio, and we were out, it was out on the end of the farm near Sea Level, that area down there. There's clam shells out there that are that big [makes big circle with hands], that came out of the bottom of the canal they dug, which was probably 10 or 12 feet when they dug it. Clams, as far as I remember, clams grow on the bottom. They live on the bottom of out there in sound, right? So if that clam was 10 feet down when they dug it up, and it's that big around, what was on top of that? And they're probably six miles from water now. So climate, weather, pattern change? Yeah, sure, absolutely, absolutely, does it have an effect? Sure, absolutely. Has it always had an effect? Absolutely, absolutely. So, you know, is it either something you learn to deal with? But by my opinion, paying a carbon tax ain't gonna fix it.

TH: Sure.

LJ: Yeah.

GS: Sorry, I said that on recording.

TH: Oh, no.

GS: I'm saying, I'm not sorry I said it on recording. I'm saying, I said it. It's not gonna, you know, it's not gonna fix it, so.

TH: Yeah, absolutely. And, I apologize too, for if I was....

GS: No, no, no, I don't mind!

TH: The museum really just wants like a perspective on like climate specifically, so.

GS: You know, climate is one of those things that you can take a lot of data points and either through statistical or non-statistical analysis, you can draw a conclusion, right? It depends on the data set. Depends on the start and the end. How broad around or how narrow you want to make it, all right? Well, I remember Grandmama saying that in, I think it was Hazel, the water was at the highway. Well, that was 1940 something. That means all that across the road over there, where my house is, was underwater at some point in time. Had it happened in a long, long, long time? No, not until Florence. So what does that mean between that period of 1940 something, whenever Hazel was until 19, when was Florence? 20...?

LJ: 2018.

GS: 2018. That's a long period of time. What happened in there? Was the weather changing? Probably. And they talk about all the shipwrecks off of Cape Lookout that were weather-related, and those kind of things. That, back in the day, is one of the reasons why the, you know, the lighthouse was built. I don't get too excited about saying weather change is causing all these dramatic things to happen. Sorry.

TH: Oh, no. Absolutely.

GS: I don't buy that. I mean, I get it. I get it. But when you go, when you go places like we went last week, and you go places like Open Grounds, and you see things like I described, you kind of go hmmm. Been there before, you know. Was this probably underwater at some point in time? Maybe, probably has before. That's why you got six or eight inches of organic matter on top of sand on top of clay. Because organic matter usually is comprised of decomposing microorganisms and grass and animals and plants and those things, right? So where did the organic matter come from? Over millennia, it built up. It built up because things died and were deposited. So probably, I don't know if that answers your question about weather?

TH: Oh, yeah, totally, completely, yeah.

LJ: Yeah. So you said you're, are you friends with the people at Open Grounds Farm?

GS: Yeah, well I'd say I know them. The manager, the manager! I don't know the owners of the farm. I know the general manager and the farm manager.

LJ: Would you say that there's a pretty typical relationship between farmers Down East, or? I know there's not many left?

GS: Between what?

LJ: Farmers Down East and Open Grounds Farm, or, you know, in between the other farms?

GS: You know, the thing about Open Ground Farms is this: all the people that work at Open Ground Farms live in Carteret County. They all live in Beaufort, or Down East. So, it's an Italian-owned farm, but all the people that farm it? They're locals—you know, I know a bunch of them individually. So they, they, you know, they do all the things that I do. Go to the Cape in the boat, go clamming and fishing and those kind of things too. So, yeah, pretty typical. Yeah.

LJ: So like, between the other farmers in Down East? Like between you and the farm down the road—would you say it's pretty tight knit? Or just kind of respectful? Or is there competition, or anything like that? Would you say that there, so there's a decline in farmers, right?

GS: I would say it's very respectful. You know, there's not a lot of them now. So unlike where you're from, Ayden, other counties, where it can be very competitive. It can be, in some farming communities, it can be very competitive for land, because land is the limiting factor, right? The thing is, the very facet in the agricultural place is land. So, the limiting factor for a farmer except for labor, is land—that can be very competitive when a farm comes on the market. You don't have that here, because you don't have that many farmers in Carteret County now. Open Grounds is the largest contiguous farm east of the Mississippi River, in this, one of the smallest farming counties in the state. You take them out, and it's like small. And I didn't do the math, but I will say there's less than 20 farmers in the county, and that's probably being generous, because I keep thinking in my mind, and I'm thinking that I can't get to 20. So they're not, I'm going to say they're a respectful group. They know each other. They're probably not, you know, getting together on Thursday night and having a farm meeting or anything. They're probably all members of Farm Bureau. You know, North Carolina Farm Bureau is well known for the insurance portion. It's probably what most people know Farm Bureau as, is an insurance company, but it's really a farm advocacy group. It's what it is, it's why it's called Farm Bureau. And they do a lot of advocacy for farmers, and I would, I would venture to say that all the farmers in Carteret County are members of Farm Bureau. And that's their connection and their voice is through Farm Bureau and those things.

LJ: So there's a decline in farmers?

GS: Absolutely.

LJ: Would you say that there is any opportunity for growth in farming or people wanting to be farmers?

GS: Mhmm, if you're willing to take the risk.

LJ: So what would you think that would have to improve for people to want to become farmers in the future?

GS: Well, land is a limiting factor, right? So if you don't, if you don't own a farm, or have family that owns a farm, you got to find suitable land. And some land, some land is not suitable for intensive agriculture. Equipment, then becomes the next major hurdle. You know, a cotton picker can be up to a million dollars. A combine is probably \$500,000 or \$600,000. So for just the basic, and I didn't, I didn't do any research on this, but you could probably do that. But just the basic things you would need to plant a corn crop on a farm with—a tractor, and a planter, and a sprayer, a combine, a grain cart, and a truck—you'd have a couple million tied up—quick. If you got used equipment, you'd have less obviously. So the capital piece, the capital piece is limiting, because it's very capital intensive. And then the input side of when you're planting that crop every year is pretty high, too, you know? For the seed, the chemicals, the fertilizer, all those things. Can it be done? Yeah.

And there's programs, you know, USDA has a New Farmer program, and CDA has a New Farmer program. There's those kind of things that can help people, young people that want to get involved in agriculture. But by and large, what you see from what I do every day—and I'm in it every day—if there's not a multi-generational family that's farming, it gets to a point that all the kids are going and doing something else, and then that farm either gets sold, sometimes as a farm to another farmer. Or it gets sold for a subdivision or something like that. And sometimes it's, you know, it's gobbled up by the bypass going around Beaufort, things like that. So it can happen. It was, you know, when Granddaddy moved here in 1918, at 36, he probably didn't have anything, and it was still expensive in 1918 dollars, probably less expensive than today, but still expensive. It would be an uphill battle. And the problem is, even with the farm programs and insurance coverage, and those kind of things, you take a year like this, where you had a really good spring. You know, we had, we had a dry, actually dry January, February, then it rained into March, but then from March until May, it was really good weather. Then it got real dry, really, really—that pond right there, two weeks ago, it was probably that deep, probably a foot deep in that pond. So that's how low the groundwater had gotten. Well, that crop's taking up water every day from the soil, if it's not getting rainwater. So the damage in that corn crop is done way before it gets to pollination, right? It sets an ear as soon as the ear shoot comes out, it's got an ear set. It's basically determining yield then. So if you have a period of dry weather then, you really have had a negative impact on yield. So my point in throwing all that out there, cleaning that up for you, is that one of those years on a young farmer starting out could be detrimental and take years to overcome. So that's the problem.

LJ: Yeah. Wanna move on a little bit?

GS: Ask. Just keep asking. If I don't want to answer, I'll tell you.

TH: Okay, yeah, no, that's perfect. You know, I think I was wondering about—going back to when you were growing up here. What was your relationship, your family's relationship, with the local grocery stores and then the 10 to 12 other farms in Bettie. What were those relationships like?

GS: So back in the day, when I was a kid, Dad grew cabbage and potatoes. And he used a produce broker that he sold his produce to. The other, there were three or four farms right here in Bettie that also grew cabbage, a couple that also grew potatoes, and they all sold to the same produce broker. So they all had a connection there. Most of what he grew and sold back then went—it didn't go locally, it went up North.

TH: Oh, really?

GS: Yeah.

TH: Okay.

GS: He got everything, put it on the truck, and a lot of them went to New York and New Jersey, places like that. Some of the potatoes, most of what Dad grew, and he grew white potatoes, were table stock. So they were washed and bagged. But they were bagged in 50s or 100s, and they went to a root packer that sold them to grocery stores up North. Sometimes, he would sell the small potatoes, which are called the bees. They would go to Campbell Soup Company, and some, and there were other farmers, and still some farmers in the county that grow potatoes for potato chips. So, they all knew each other, kind of pseudo-worked together, you know. But they all had their own operation and did their own thing.

But there was a connection between their suppliers, the ag retailers that supply them fertilizer, chemicals, and seed, and the produce broker that they sold the produce to. When I started the greenhouse operation in 1978, that's when we started growing tomatoes and cucumbers, and all of those were sold here. G & R Clover Farm in Smyrna, which is now Cape Lookout Grocery, and Billy Best at Harkers Island—they were the first two customers I had. They were the first two people to buy some produce. And then as it expanded, and then when I went to college, and Dad really grew the business, that's when he really expanded the footprint and sold to local grocery stores throughout Carteret County into Newport and into Pamlico County, because at the time, the Piggly Wiggly in Beaufort—the family that owned that had a lot of different Piggly Wigglys from New Bern to all those places, so he sold to all of them, so. But, the connection was to the original Piggly Wiggly store there in Beaufort. And then they branched out from there. He sold some to Lowe's, I think he sold some to Food Lion at one time. The majority of what the Simpson Tomatoes has been sold, over time, have been sold, you know, from the Red & White at Atlantic to all the little G & R, Billy Best, all those places. So that was the connection

to the grocery store chain. It's difficult for a farmer to deal directly with a big grocery store chain, because of packaging and all those kinds of things. Next time you go to the grocery store and you pick up a vegetable, look at the four-digit code on it. Right? That's for the grocery store. It's not for the farmer. So when Dad was in the tomato business to sell tomatoes to certain grocery stores, he had to incorporate that four digit code on the sticker.

LJ: Oh!

GS: Yeah, so his tomatoes had that four-digit SKU for whatever it was they were looking up. You see that right there? [shows image of SKU number on a tomato in a grocery store]

TH: Oh, look at that!

GS: 4799, that's the SKU for a greenhouse tomato.

TH: Okay.

GS: So when it come across the scale, the person, the cashier can just type in 4799, so yeah.

TH: So, when that Simpson Tomato business really exploded, how, how were, how was your family dealing with all that extra business?

GS: Extra business? Well, I mean, it was an integral part of the farming operation. So it wasn't, you know, it wasn't like a windfall or anything. It was an integral part of the farming operation. And became, over time, the farming operation. You know, as Granddad retired and got out, Dad got out of the hog business, got rid of the cows. The credit crisis and those things, and then labor, like I explained earlier, really pushed him away from the high-intensive cabbage and potato business just coming from a labor standpoint. And that's when he went to the tomatoes, because he could do it with less labor and those kind of things. So that transition was, in hindsight, it seems pretty quick, but over time, it was a gradual, and it was almost a natural, progression the way things happened.

TH: Okay, I see. Thank you, that clarifies that. Do you have any?

LJ: Yeah, we'll move on to our last ones. So what is your hope for this land, for your family, and then eventually the hope for Down East?

GS: My ambition is that this piece of property will always be a farm of some description. That's my hope, right? And that's a difficult thing to achieve, because you still have to pay taxes on it. You still have to keep it up, maintain it, those kind of things. If you ride around the county in Bettie and you see farms that are not planted in corn or beans and are kind of grown up? Well, that's a problem. Cause what's going to happen to them, right? So that's something that I'm not going to say keeps me up at night. I do have a plan in the back of my mind—that I'm not going to share—but my ambition and my hope is that

this will always be a farm and not be a subdivision or anything else like that. And like I said earlier, I think agricultural land, even Down East, is important for the aesthetic, what it brings to the community and those kind of things. Some people only see it as an opportunity. You know, a developer—and I'm not speaking on developers—I mean, everybody's going to do what they got to do. But for a developer, a farm is great. No trees to clear. It's ditched, it's drained, it's all those things. So for them, it's an ideal place to develop, because it's very easy to develop versus a piece of wooded land or something like that. So I understand that part, too. And I think the other piece a lot of people don't get, and I remember when Mr. Neil Campen sold his farm in Beaufort many, many years ago. And somebody from the newspaper interviewed him, he said something to the effect that, what a lot of people don't understand is that the land is a farmer's 401K—that's their retirement, right? They've worked their whole life, they've grown crops, they've grown families, all those things, and their retirement is the land. So, that's a true statement. And you see that in a lot of places where—you've seen it in Ayden—where family farms, you know, generational farms get sold so the people can retire or get sold for whatever reason. But, to back up, my hope is that 100 years from now, someone can sit right here and have a similar conversation about, you know, this farm to be existence—and this was a farm before 1918, right? It's just been in our family since 1918. So that's my hope.

LJ: Yeah, that's great.

GS: It's kind of crazy, right?

LJ: Well, it makes sense.

GS: Yeah, places should be preserved. Some places should be preserved. Some places should just, you know, there's got to be room for growth and advancement and all those kind of things. Some places should just be kind of be off limits. I think what the National Park Service has done in a lot of places is really, really good. They preserve some places that otherwise would not, not be the natural state that they're in, and provide the aesthetic and things that they provide. Don't stop asking questions just because it's been an hour.

TH: [Laughs]

GS: I'm serious. I'm not—I'm not out of time.

LJ: Well, I think that we're kind of—

GS: Are we at the end?

TH: I guess, is there anything else that you'd like to share that we haven't covered?

GS: I think I've kind of hit all the pieces I want to hit. You know, farming, I think farming and fishing—and what a lot of people don't understand, it's a business, right? Church is a business, okay? So get past

that. But farming is a way of life. And even today, with all the technology that people have and even, you know, it may not be their own farm land—it's still a way of life. They're putting blood, sweat, tears, effort, into that farm. And you know, they don't, they don't clock in and clock out. They really don't. They don't clock in and clock out. They go until it's done—which is something that's kind of unique, I think, kind of something that a lot of people miss. I think societally, a lot of people don't understand what it means to do something on time and to do something with precision. But if you grew up on a farm, you understand what it means to do something on time and to be precise. Because I remember Dad saying, "the best you can do is probably not good enough." And I've seen him, you know, up until two years ago, right up there, when he was getting ready to plant strawberries in the fall, and he would spend a whole week—don't worry, it's a dirt diver—he would spend a whole week getting that field ready to put plastic down so that he could plant strawberries. And he would till it, and he would till it, and he would plow it, and row shape it. And then it would rain, and with the kind of rain we can get here, you know, three or four inches. And he'd start all over, and you wouldn't hear him complain. He just, you know, gotta do it again. So that, to me, is something that a lot of people don't get, is that, the outcome—I'm watching somebody over there do something, and I don't know exactly who that is. The outcome is directly dependent on your willingness not to quit, not to quit. Who is that in a tractor? And how are they mowing there? That is a cornfield. We might be done, ladies.

TH: Okay! Oh, yeah.

GS: I might have to go talk to somebody. Any other questions that you have?

TH: I think you hit everything.

GS: I appreciate your time.

LJ: Oh, we appreciate your time!

GS: if you have any questions or anything, or if you have a follow up you want to do, just let me know.

TH: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

GS: If there's something that when you go back through it, that you go "Whaa!" It's nice to meet you. Good Luck!

LJ: Thank you!

GS: Nice to meet you—you never said where you go to school?

TH: Oh, Chapel Hill.

GS: Oh, okay.

TH: Yeah.

GS: Chapel Hill.

LJ: That's what I said.